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2005

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9-9-2005

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Recommended Citation

University Marketing and Communications, "09/09/2005 - Special Olympics Family Festival Seeks Volunteers.pdf" (2005). 2005. 167.
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Special Olympics Family Festival Seeks Volunteers

Sep-09-2005

Last year, after President Lou Hencken's emphasis on student volunteerism, the Special Olympics Family Festival had a surge in student helpers.

This year, however, the number of volunteers is down, and officials are asking for more students to set aside part of their Saturday to help a worthy cause.

The Special Olympics Family Festival, set for 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 17, at Lake Land College in Mattoon, is designed to be a fun outing for more than 1,000 Olympians and their families.

Each Olympian is paired with a volunteer Friend-For-A-Day, who accompanies the Olympian through games, activities and other events. Food is available for everyone throughout the day.

Among the many activities Olympians can enjoy are dancing, karaoke, a hayride, mechanical-bull riding and carnival games. Each Olympian always wins a ribbon and prize.

This year's special guest will be actor Chris Burke, best known for his role as Corky Thatcher in the TV series "Life Goes On."

Of the 1,000 Friends-For-A-Day, typically 650 are EIU students. This year, fewer volunteers have signed up, and time is running out.

EIU students who wish to volunteer must sign up in advance through the College of Education and Professional Studies, 581-2524. Students are then asked to attend an orientation meeting at 6 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 13, in Buzzard Auditorium.

EIU organizers help organize carpools for students needing a ride to the festival.

In addition to the 1,000 Friends-For-A-Day, another 2,000 volunteers work behind the scenes, and they're available to help Friends-For-A-Day with support at any time.

"All a volunteer has to do is wear comfortable shoes and a happy face," said Kathlene Shank, chair of EIU's department of education. Shank serves on the SOFF steering committee and is responsible for coordinating EIU volunteers.

Students often maintain relationships with their new friends long after the event is over, Shank said. Most volunteers come back year after year, including some community members who started volunteering during their college years.

And some EIU students who have graduated and moved to other communities call Shank to ask where the nearest Special Olympics activities are so they can remain involved.

"It's something that once you've done it, it gets to your heart," Shank said. "If you want to feel good on Sunday, come out to the Special Olympics Family Festival on Saturday."

Non-student community members 16 and older who would like to volunteer for all or part of the day may contact Consolidated Communications at (800) 434-SOFF.

The festival is not open to the public. Only Olympians and volunteers may participate.